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Albania marks the Holocaust

By Warren L. Miller

Throughout much of the Muslim world, Holocaust denial and distortion is becoming a bedrock article of faith. Through the Arabic translations of Holocaust revisionist literature and classic anti-Semitic screeds, some Arab and Muslim leaders have sought to make Holocaust denial a tool against Israel and the West.

But in at least a few corners of Islam, there is an honest accounting of the past — and in particular, an understanding of what befell European Jewry more than six decades ago.

In January, I addressed the parliament of the European nation of Albania — which is predominantly Muslim — as it commemorated for the first time Holocaust Remembrance Day.

Immediately before World War II, Albania was a nation of rich and varied cultures — Muslims, Christians and Jews had lived together with dignity and harmony for centuries. This was the nation of Mother Teresa's childhood. Albanians had no appetite for the racism and anti-Semitism then sweeping Europe.

In 1943, Nazi occupiers demanded that Albanian authorities produce a list of Jewish residents. While other nations cooperated fully with such demands — some even willingly did more — Albania stoutly refused.

Not only did Albania protect its own Jewish citizens, but hundreds of Jews from Austria, Germany, Greece, Serbia and elsewhere in Yugoslavia were given sanctuary by the Albanian people.

One such hero was a farmer in Kruja, Sulo Mecaj, who fed and sheltered 10 Jews in his home at great danger to himself and his family. As Nazis neared his home, Mecaj sent the Jews to the crawl space in his attic to hide. When the frightened Jews asked what would happen if the house were set afire, Mecaj sent his only son to hide with them. Years later, his

son said he understood why his father put his life in danger — it was a matter of honor to keep these Jews safe.

Of all the things that can be said in praise of Albania's actions during World War II, one fact says it all: Albania was the only nation in Europe that had a larger Jewish population after World War II than before.

Yet for years after the war, Albania's communist rulers failed to acknowledge this proud and heroic record. Albania knew little about those who had protected Jews from deportation and death. This was no mere oversight: Communists, like most despots, were virulently anti-Semitic.

But in Albania, now free from communist rule, there is an interest in learning about the murder of Jews throughout Europe.

So, Albania is remembering the 5,000 Jewish communities lost during this horrible chapter in European history. It is remembering the 1.5 million children slaughtered. It remembers despite the sustained attack on historical truth represented by the Holocaust denial movement.

Albania, long ignored in Europe, is showing Europeans and the world what it means to be a truly free and honorable nation. It is embracing its own cultural diversity; in Albania it is illegal to form a political party based on ethnicity or religion. It is protecting its heritage from the kind of anti-Semitism and xenophobia sweeping nations which consider themselves far more cosmopolitan and forward-thinking. And in the global war between civilization and militant Islamism, Albania is a shining example that in a Muslim country, diversity of thought, brotherhood in action, and respect for all faiths can exist. Those qualities are all behind Albania's effort to remember the Holocaust. And they are what will help all of humanity prevent its recurrence.

Mother Teresa, a daughter of Albania, once said: "I want you to be concerned about your neighbor. Do you know your next-door neighbor?"

Today, Albanian children learn the proud history of Albania during those war years when neighbors protected neighbors. The entire nation is learning about the dangers of hatred and totalitarianism and the need to remember the victims of Nazi Germany.

And just as important, Albania is taking those lessons to heart, and remains an example of tolerance today. A nation where Muslims and Christians can live peaceably side-by-side is rare in this world — and yet an example from which the rest of the world can and must learn.

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